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SOME ART MATTERS CONSIDERED.

BY A. J. CONANT.

THE TARIFF ON WORKS OF ART.—FRAUDS IN ART.—AMERICANS STUDYING ART ABROAD.—THE ART OF VARIOUS NATIONS.

THE subject of the Tariff is one of the vexed questions which has come down to us as a part of our paternal inheritance, whose roots run back through all the history of the republic.

To its elucidation the leaders of opposing parties have addressed themselves with persistent and searching thoughtfulness; and if all that has been spoken in public, or printed in newspapers and pamphlets upon the subject were gathered in book form, few libraries could contain the collection. And yet it would seem that the opinions of very few have ever been changed by the array of facts and arguments of the opposing faction.

There never has been unanimity upon the tariff question, and under present conditions it is doubtless not to be expected. The elements which enter into it are variable quantities which often derive their importance from local causes and conditions which may be imperative to-day and lose their influence or become dead issues to-morrow. Different localities may and do change views on the question according as self-interest or potent corporations may demand.

In general, in these historic discussions, one thing seems noteworthy: that is the spirit of fairness with which they have been conducted. The leading men of both sides have appeared to be animated by a conscientious desire to present the facts as they were and to arrive at just conclusions. It is to be regretted that this spirit has not always been manifested by those who have attempted to enlighten the public concerning the question of a tariff on works of art, for much that has been written on the subject, it would not be difficult to show is unfair, misleading, and sometimes absolutely false.

Such ill-considered statements are the more to be regretted when their harmful influence is made potent by the high sanction of the influential literary and scientific journals through which they reach the public.

In a recent number of a leading magazine, an article appeared entitled "A Chinese Wall for American Art." While much of the article is childish and irrelevant, some of its statements show a sad want of information on the subject of art education that is surprising. For example, the writer says, "Shakspeare can be read nearly, if not quite as intelligently in New York as in London; a student of anatomy can find as good subjects to dissect in Philadelphia as in Paris. But a student of art can find not one Greek statue in America, not one work of Michael Angelo, not one supreme example of any of the great periods of art production." What are the facts? All the leading art schools of America from New York to the cities of the far West have the same facilities for instruction in Greek art that the schools of Europe furnish; all are equipped with casts from moulds taken from the original statues which bear the official stamp of the governments or schools which

supply them—casts of the Elgin Marbles, Apollos, torsos Venuses,—the works of Michael Angelo, of the massive bronze work of Ghiberti, and a host of others;—all are here and may be studied without going abroad for the purpose.

With such copies the schools of Europe are furnished, and from such the pupils draw;—not from the original statues. These casts, properly placed and lighted, as often the originals cannot be—are on that account more advantageous for study than the originals, and are better also for the reason that some of the latter are so discolored that the subtle modeling of some of the parts is confused with the stains upon the marble. Hence it will be seen that the argument that a tariff on art would exclude American art students from the study of Greek art has no foundation. It might as well be said that one must go abroad to study the works of classic authors because the original manuscripts are there.

Again, the writer says: "The art of the American savage was protected by the laws of nature for many thousand years, and yet the painting and sculpture of the Indians can hardly compete with those of Italy."

What nonsense! and yet, this is reiterated. As if any art worthy the name were possible except in conjunction with the highest degree of intellectual development and refinement!—of which, in fact, it is the culmination. Further on, we are startled with another amazing question;—it is this: "If Italian art had been protected against that of Greece, where would have been the Renaissance?"

There was no immediately antecedent or contemporaneous Greek art for Italy to protect herself against. Greek art was dead and buried centuries before the Renaissance. Not one painting of the Golden age of Greek art was in existence then.

Upon the character of the so-called Greek art which immediately preceded the Renaissance, and its supposed influence in the development of the latter, Vasari and Lanzi can enlighten us. Vasari describes the works of the Greek artists, with whom Cimabue and other early Italian artists studied, as "crude and rude, containing figures with senseless eyes, outstretched hands, standing on the points of their feet." He speaks also of the gradual deliverance of Cimabue from the influence of the pernicious style of the Greeks, "whose works are full of hard lines and sharp angles, in mosaic and painting." "From the year 1,000 down to the middle of the Thirteenth century," says Lanzi, "Art in Italy had degenerated into a kind of mechanism, which, after the models afforded by the Greek workers in mosaics, invariably exhibited the same legends,—in which nature appeared distorted rather than represented." It was about the time last mentioned, he tells us, that the Tuscan artists "shook off the trammels of the modern Greeks, and learned to adopt the ancients for their models." "Barbarism had not only overwhelmed the arts, but the maxims necessary for their reestablishment." Again, in his biography of Giotto, he says: "The meager hands, the sharp pointed feet and staring eyes—remnants of the Grecian manner—all acquired more correctness under him."

It was not until he broke away from the teachings of his Greek masters that his talents began to appear. These masters, he says further, "were very incompetent instructors, as they knew but little."

Sufficient has been quoted from these high authorities to show that the Renaissance, so far from receiving any beneficial impulse from contemporary Greek art, was rather retarded in its development by it, and protection *against* such art would have been a blessing.

Now, a protective tariff for American art may or may not be desirable:—the question has two sides, on both of which

the case with Dumas, who for two years rested in the belief that he possessed a valuable and genuine Corot.

Now if such impostures can be successfully carried on in the countries—nay, the very cities—where the artists have lived and labored, how much more easily may we in America be imposed upon, where the means of detection are so slight, and where, indeed, in many cases the only guarantee of genuineness we have is the assurance of the interested dealer who offers the alleged works of deceased foreign artists for sale! In view of the recent disclosures alluded to, it is reasonable to suppose that in most of the private



A SKETCH ON THE ESOPUS.—FROM A SKETCH BY J. R. BREVOORT, N. A.

very much may be said. The design of this article is not so much to enter into a lengthy discussion of it, as it is to call attention to a few considerations bearing directly or indirectly upon the question, and which seem to the writer to be worthy of serious thought. That enormous frauds are perpetrated in the sale of works of art, as in all branches of commerce, might be conceded on general principles, still the public was hardly prepared for the revelation of the amazing impositions which have been practiced in Europe, by which experienced judges of art have been deceived into the purchase of spurious works, alleged to have been painted by eminent modern artists;—as was

collections in America there is a greater or less number of spurious works. This becomes all the more probable when we consider that the particular style or method of any artist may be easily imitated, with a little practice, by a skilful man. It is simply still life, or mechanical imitation, which, in art, is one of its lowest elements.

Thirty or forty years ago, the craze was for old masters. There were at that time, in New York and Philadelphia, large private galleries filled with works which the owners believed to be genuine. That these were frauds every educated artist well knew, but he lost caste if he said so. At the present time American artists know and have known

all along that a large number of the foreign pictures which have been purchased by American collectors are studio rubbish, or are more or less fraudulent. Yet whenever they have ventured to enter a mild protest against the imposture, their action has been credited to envy and professional jealousy, and their well-grounded opinions too seldom have had any weight against the statements of the interested dealers in such works, who perhaps, intentionally honest, have been imposed upon by men sharper than themselves. Not long ago, in this city, a public sale of a large collection of pictures took place. The catalogue contained a long list of names of artists well known to fame, and most of these

would have made enemies who might have retaliated by in some way injuring his reputation.

American artists are not in favor of a tariff which would result in the exclusion of good foreign art. Honest, genuine works they welcome, from whatever country; the more the better for American art. What they do protest against is the palming of meaningless canvases, spurious Corots, Troyons, Daubignys and the rest, upon the American people. In their view, the tariff should be not so much for the protection of American art as it should be for protection from fraud and from the impositions practiced upon American picture-buyers. Many of the artists of New York have



A BIT OF ENGLISH HEATH.—FROM A SKETCH BY J. R. BREVOORT, N. A.

pictures are presumably now in the private galleries of the wealthy men of New York. With what complacent satisfaction their present owners must regard their purchases if they read the statement of the owner of the collection published after the sale, concerning the character of the paintings. Among other things he has stated that there were but two really good pictures among them all, and that they were not for sale, but were "stool pigeons." Now all this was no new revelation to experienced artists; every man of them could have enlightened the buyers of these and similar works; but, as before stated, if one had raised his voice against the amazing frauds of some picture dealers, he only

been and are opposed to any tariff. Many have signed a protest against it, the writer among the number. But whatever the merits of the question may be, some good has been accomplished in one direction; it has called out a wide range of discussion, by which the public is becoming informed concerning the tricks of dealers in Europe and at home, and persons will hereafter exercise greater care and better judgment in future purchases. A specific duty of one hundred dollars upon every foreign picture imported into America would no doubt protect picture buyers to a great extent from the imposition of dealers.

In the article before noticed, much stress is laid upon the

social suffering of American art students abroad on account of the tariff; and also the "peril of being turned out of the art schools where they are being freely educated at the cost of foreign governments."

It is quite possible that the case is not so lamentable as the writer would have us believe, even should these results follow. Suppose they are turned out of the free government schools; it would not be difficult to show that many of them would be all the better for it. They would then be thrown more upon their own resources, and their powers would be developed into a more pronounced individuality and manly independence;—that is, if they possessed decided ability, and if they did not, no school could make great artists of them.

A long pupilage in the school of any one man, however gifted and great, is beset with perils—all the greater in proportion to the immaturity of the pupil. Here lies the greatest danger. The practice of American art students has too frequently been to go abroad just so soon as a fair degree of skill in drawing has been acquired. There they enter at once given schools, before their judgment is at all matured, with their minds in a most plastic state, and each subjects himself to the guidance and influence of some popular instructor. The consequence is he copies in a servile way the methods and manners of his teachers, and in the end loses himself. Twenty-five years and more ago, Düsseldorf was the Mecca of American art students. That school placed its stamp on them like the seal on the wax. Only the strongest among them were ever able to break the shackles of its influence, and develop a style of their own.

The school of Couture is another case in point. Many of his pupils naturally enough imitated his method; this he deplored and warned them against, telling them that this was something peculiar to himself, and should not be copied. "Go and study the works of Titian," said he, "for no man can tell how he worked;"—giving them to understand that methods and technique were only the language by which thought and sentiment were to be expressed, and that every one should strive to acquire a language best adapted to the expression of his own ideas.

The true and safe course for the student to follow, it is believed, is to study at home until he becomes a thorough draughtsman, which can be accomplished here nearly as well as abroad,—and until his judgment is fairly matured, so that he can look at nature and works of art with penetrating sight. Then let him go abroad, gathering from every source such helps as he will then know he most needs, to equip him for his chosen course. The history of American art contains the record of a multitude of failures of young men of high promise, who doubtless would have achieved an honorable distinction but for their premature subjection to the potent influence of a particular master or school of art. Art in America, at the present time, is in a formative and somewhat anomalous condition, and it is problematical whether any legislation can do much for its advancement. It certainly can only be made what it ought to be, and enabled to achieve its high possibilities, by the American people. The people must be educated until some of the

fundamental principles of art are better understood, and until a broader public sentiment prevails, or at least until the people learn that all "art is the pictorial expression of thought"—that form, color, light and shade and dextrous handling are but the medium—the language of that expression; or, in other words, that they are the drapery of the thought, which they are to clothe and adorn.

Inman was wont to say that "two or three generations of artists must be immolated before our people would be so educated as to give that encouragement to American art which is generously bestowed upon art in Europe." That same patriotic public sentiment is what is wanted here,—a sentiment which takes hold with helpful hand and fosters American art because it is American, and because its excellence, notwithstanding all its disabilities, makes it worthy of such help, and gives high promise of a glorious future. What American artists most need is the opportunity to work out their best thoughts and sublimest conceptions. There are men in New York whose portfolios are filled with studies and sketches, which if enlarged and elaborated as they are capable of doing, would gain them world-wide renown; but they cannot afford to devote to their execution the time and labor which such works would require, with no immediate prospect of sale. Their families must have bread, and so they are compelled to paint less important works, and such as find a readier sale. In a word, all that the artists of America ask for is simply the encouragement and opportunity to do their best. The lack of such encouragement is the reason why so many Americans expatriate themselves and spend their lives abroad. From the time of Copley and West to the present, what an army of gifted artists have done so! This is not a complimentary feature of our history. When we read of their achievements in the foreign countries of their adoption, we feel that what we have lost cannot be estimated. Certain it is, had they received such encouragement as would have induced them to remain at home, the influence of their talents, combined with that of the artists who did remain, would have resulted in the development of American art to such degree of excellence and greatness that it would now be one of the crowning glories of American civilization. In conclusion, many of the erroneous ideas concerning art matters—particularly art education—are based upon the false notion that a school of art is the outgrowth of an antecedent school. For this it would be difficult to find any warrant in history. While the ancient Greeks were in constant communication with the Egyptians, they seem to have borrowed little from Egyptian art. If it be said that Egypt really had no art worthy to be called art, it should be remembered that before the name of Attica was known, and when Italy was the abode of savage tribes as wild as the American Indians, Egypt was in the noontide splendor of a marvelous civilization, while the Greek nation was slowly evolving from the confederation of her then nomadic and predatory tribes, under the pressure of the Persian armies. Egypt was the leading power among the nations of the earth in the influence of her arts, her literature, religion, and in the beneficent form of her government. She was the "homestead of the nations" and her

priests became the instructors of mankind. The art of Egypt was the best there was, and it is truly surprising that while the Greeks borrowed so much from her in other directions, they were so little influenced by her art.

The fact is, Greek art was the fruit, or rather a part and parcel of her own institutions.

The freedom-loving spirit of the people, their heroic ancestry, their poetic mythology, the fostering care of their rulers, all conspired to make that art possible which culminated in the age of Pericles, and which has been the admiration of the world ever since. It is clear that religion and government have had more influence in the promotion of the fine arts than all other causes; in these the national characteristics find their visible expression. A school of art is then the result of a particular civilization, or condition of things in the life of a given people, and as an integral part of that life, inasmuch as art is the language by which the thought, sentiment and feeling of the people is expressed. And as each nation has thoughts, sentiments and feelings peculiar to itself, each national school of art is individualized and has no power of propagation, no matter how excellent and noble may be its achievements.

Methods and technique may be learned from schools, but that which constitutes the distinctive life of a national art, never. It culminates and declines with the nation which gave it birth, and three hundred years generally comprises its whole history.

AMERICAN VS. FOREIGN-AMERICAN ART.

AN American writer for a London art journal in noticing the Pastel Exhibition held in New York this Spring, says that in London or Paris it would have made a sensation. Here it was different, owing to the fact, perhaps, of the effort that has been made for years by snobs, picture dealers and foreign-educated artists, to prove that Americans cannot paint.

The London exhibit of the American Water Colors, although not a financial success, was nevertheless a success in gaining the good opinions of the British press and public, although the collection was not as good as might have been desired. The New York exhibitions of Water Colors have proved for several years that we are progressing in the art faster than other nations.

For years, the Society exhibitions were comparatively unnoticed by the press, public and artists. Liberality was always the motto of the Society, and all schools of painting were encouraged for the good that might exist in them,—even the wildest forms of impressionism.

Lately, some new members of the Society have endeavored to change all this and to hang the galleries with only works painted in their own peculiar school, excluding the rest, even the works of members. If they could have their way, we would have an exhibition that no one would care to visit twice, and which would kill the Society in three years.

It is strange that young men, fresh from the liberal atmosphere of the European studios, should bring home such narrow-minded notions. The way in which they managed

the Munich exhibit, shows plainly what they would do if they had the power. No one could paint, exhibit or earn a living if they could prevent it, unless he conformed to their ideas of art.

They are not *born* artists, they have been schooled to apply paint skilfully to canvas, to use the brush, the palette knife and the fingers to perfection; their pictures are full of *technique*, but without art, for they do not *feel* that a picture should be a poem, a story, a tragedy or a comedy—that it should awaken in the human breast some interest besides admiration for mere mechanical skill and dexterity.

Do you remember the picture of the "Linen Weavers" in the Old Düsseldorf Gallery? It was a picture so powerful that one needed no catalogue to understand it. It was the story of ill-paid labor, dread poverty and wrongs of the toiling workers by the grinding capitalist. It was said that the German government forbade its exhibition, so very strongly was the story told.

The modern student from Paris or Munich would turn up his nose at the method in which it was painted, but it will endure long after the acres of "impressions" shall have been consigned to the rubbish heap. There are too many painters—not enough artists. Young men who might make good merchants or tradesmen are sent to Paris by mistaken friends; they learn the mechanical part of art, and wonder when they return, at the success of some painter who has not had the benefit of instruction in a good school, but whose pictures are full of an art feeling which they not only do not possess, but have no conception of.

A picture must be more than a skilfully painted canvas;—it must tell something. People do not read books simply because they are well printed and handsomely bound.

These young men continually harp on studying from Nature. How far some of them get from her! What different results are reached by different men in painting out-of-doors! One gives us a Velten, another a Corot landscape; still another, a Daubigny, *et al*—according to the master who has influenced him the most. A painter I knew made an American landscape look like a scene in Germany, atmosphere, houses, figures and all. Another sat down and composed a picture as different from the scene before him as if it were in another hemisphere.

Some men can never paint from memory or feeling—they give us only cold facts in the most mannered way.

I hold it impossible to paint a large and important work entirely out-of-doors, for light and effect change so rapidly that the mind becomes confused and involved in difficulty from which there is no escape except to take the picture into the studio to finish it.

Hamerton, in his "Painter's Camp," describes the pains and pleasures of out-door work better than any other writer has done, and the perusal of his book would be a revelation to many an artist who might take the time to read it.

Many of our artists learn certain artists' tricks and then repeat them continually, with no idea of the deeper meaning of art, but only of the outside of things, and very trivial things at that. All earnestness of purpose is lost, and with them art becomes a useless field of affectation where their tricks